No. 54 5 CENTS

Young Rough Riders Weekly

MOST FASCINATING WESTERN STORIES

THE YOUNG ROUGH RIDER'S STILL-HUNT

OR The Mystery of Dead Man's Pass

Black Bess caught the outlaw chief by the collar and, holding his weight by her teeth, swung him out over the yawning chasm, while Ted held the terror-stricken mob at bay.

The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1905, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, *238 William St., N. Y. Application made at the New York Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 54. NEW YORK, April 29, 1905. Price Five Cents.

The Young Rough Rider's Still Hunt;

OR,

THE MYSTERY OF DEAD MAN'S PASS.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING WARNING.

"Lift a finger and you are a dead man!"

The startling command rang out on the still afternoon air with a clearness and determination which showed the ominous purpose of the speaker.

A moment before he and his companion, riding closely upon his heels, had been following a lonely mountain pathway upon the Pacific slope, when suddenly, and without any previous display of his presence, a person had sprung from a clump of bushes crowding itself down upon the narrow pathway, and seized the bridle rein of his magnificent steed.

But before the audacious stranger could open his mouth to speak, if such had been his intentions, even before his hand had closed its hold firmly upon the rein, the aroused horse had seized him with its teeth fastened upon the collar of his rough jacket, and, lifted bodily into the air by this powerful animal, he was flung, heels over head, into the scrubby growth half a rod away.

This unexpected movement of the horse had been barely accomplished, and the assailant had not risen to his feet, when the rider of the steed covered him with a pair of Colt revolvers, and he gave utterance to the stern command:

"Lift a finger and you are a dead man!"

"Don't shoot!" begged the man upon his knees, his hands uplifted and a wild, haggard expression upon his uncouth countenance.

"Then show me good reason why I should not," replied the man upon horseback.

At the same time his companion, as if trained in such warfare, drew his own serviceable weapons, and was immediately on his guard against an attack from some other direction.

"I am yer friend," said the baffled assailant from his

retreat, a tremor in his voice in spite of his endeavor to control his fears.

"Friends are not in the habit of giving such greetings as trying to hold up him whom he would befriend."

"I durst not do different."

"Why?"

"How could I? Ye'd shot me like a sage rabbit if I'd sung out to ye. 'Sides thet would hev roused 'em yonder."

"You speak in riddles, sir."

"Mebbe I'm rattled," declared the other, an apparent honestness running through his words.

Yet he did not look like one that could be trusted.

His features bore the unmistakable stamp of a life of dissipation. And his garb was that of one in want, the stout jacket faded and torn, his trousers needing mending at the knees, while his feet were semiencased in a pair of old moccasins, long since passed their usefulness.

What was even stranger for a solitary man in that country, he carried, as far as could be seen, no weapons of offense or defense.

The horseman had already decided that he was either a harmless lunatic, or one of those wandering mendicants that occasionally find their way into that God-forsaken corner of the world.

Let that be so or not, long experience on the frontier had taught him to treat every person as an enemy until he had proved himself to the contrary.

Accordingly he still covered his man, while he said with less sternness in his tone:

"Come, if you have anything to say, speak up. We have a long journey to make ere nightfall, and have no time to waste in useless parley."

"I reckon it'd been a longer one if it hadn't been for me," said the man, still failing to offer any explanation.

A frown swept over the handsome, boyish features of the young fellow on horseback, nettled at the useless delay.

Perhaps the stranger cowering in the thicket was overawed by the striking appearance of the young rider, who was little more than a boy in years, though he bore himself with the manner of one who was master of the situation.

His lithe, compact figure, bearing not an ounce of superfluous flesh, yet round in every limb and filled with grace and symmetry, was clad in a suit of khaki cloth, fitting tightly enough so as not to lose any of the perfect outlines of form, gave free play to the wearer.

This natty, brown uniform was rendered more marked in its fitness by a wide-brimmed sombrero, which upon this particular occasion the owner had looped up at one side with a gold pin, fashioned in the shape of an eagle's claws.

About his body was girthed a web belt, holding a row of cartridges for the heavy Colt revolvers that were now doing such effective purpose in the hands of their owner.

Across his back was slung a repeating rifle of most approved pattern, while his saddle was furnished with a blanket, a few camp materials, and such other necessities as one bent upon a long journey would be prudent to take with him.

If the rider presented this striking and pleasing appearance, the steed he bestrode was deserving of equal notice.

This was a creature of faultless proportions, clean limbs, a clear-cut head showing marked intellgence in the thin nostrils, the thin, sensitive lips, the soft, pointed ears, and, above all, in the lustrous eyes, which seemed to mirror the light and feeling of a human soul.

In the black coat of his matchless mare there was not to be found a white hair. But if possessing a dark habit in the silky hair that covered her form, she was what could be called "white to the heart."

Perhaps both she and her rider have been recognized.

They hardly need an introduction, even in this section of wild country, where only those ventured who sought a short and quick passage to the fruitful valleys lying on the other side of the mountains.

One was the brave, gallant Ted Strong, the young rough rider of the West, who was gaining fresh laurels in that wild country, after having won his spurs in the Philippines and in Cuba.

His steed was black Bess.

The companion of the young rough rider upon this afternoon was his faithful friend, Bud Morgan.

Clothed, like his young leader, in khaki brown, armed to the teeth, so to speak, like his companion, the long, yellow hair falling from under his sombrero upon his firm-set shoulders, gave to this bold rider a picturesque appearance.

He rode a powerful horse of a deep bay, once ridden by an old enemy of the young rough rider, Capt. Nemo, of Skittymount fame, and who had fallen before the prowess of this twain.

No doubt the stranger in the thicket had come to un-

derstand that he had tested the patience of the young rough rider as far as it was good policy for him to do so.

Suddenly "pulling himself together," as it might be said, he exclaimed:

"This is Dead Man's Pass."

"So I was told at the lower settlements. But I have not seen the old fellow yet, unless you are he."

"Ye make light of a serious matter," whimpered the other. "'Tain't no laughin' matter to be caught up here."

"So I should judge you might think. As for me, I see nothing to warrant such a grewsome name being attached to such a picturesque scene. Look around you, man, where will one find a nobler picture of mountains and valleys, of rock benches and diamonded tables set upon massive pillars?"

"Ye'd been dead, like th' rest on 'em afore this 'f it hadn't been for me," growled the man. Then, as if in way of further explanation, he continued:

"I wus erbout to warn ye not to go enny furder. No man has ever lived that has tried to do it."

"Now you grow childish. Pray, what is there to prove the truth of your words."

"Prove my words? I was never caught in a lie. I've known o' more than twenty men ridin' up this pass, but of 'em all, never one has come back to tell on't."

"Probably, like myself, they had no intentions of coming back."

"They couldn't if they would. They never crossed to th' other side."

Though wild and vague seemed the statements of this stranger, the young rough rider knew they only substantiated what he had been told before coming up this way.

It was current among the sojourners miles away, that party after party of travelers had found their way hither, but of them all, no one had ever returned to tell what had become of his companions, or how he had escaped.

"How do you know they didn't cross to the other side?" asked Ted.

"They were never heard of arter they rode round yonder rock. 'F they crossed to t'other side it was on the eternal side," said the man, impressively.

"Now I've s'plained mysel' ain't ye goin' to take 'way 'em shooters? 'Tain't pleasant to look inter sich eyes while ye air talkin. I'm an honest man. 'F I weren't I mought hev shot ye without liftin' my voice or gettin' in th' way o' thet tarnal animile. What sharp teeth she has. 'Pears like she took a goodish bit right out'n my shoulder. Please lower 'em shooters."

"Step out into the path," commanded Ted.

The other obeyed with an alacrity that might not have been expected from one of his appearance.

The young rough rider saw at a glance that he was wholly unarmed.

He lowered his own weapons, when the loose-jointed figure of the man quickly straightened, and a look of relief came over his uncouth features.

"Seems more like," he muttered. "Ye won't go on?"

"Who are you?" demanded Ted, sternly, "who takes so much interest in us, who, as far as I know, are strangers to you?"

"I—I'm Lonesome Jim," stammered the other. "She tol' me to come and stop ye, an' I alwus does 's she tells me."

"Who's she? The more you say the less you explain."

"A wee bit o' a lass thet you befriended down in Custer —Mollie Burt. She heerd ye were comin' up hyur to look fer a chap from New York, and she sent me posthaste to stop ye. Ye see, she didn't want ye to run inter sich a trap."

"I remember Mollie," replied the young rough rider, recalling a thrilling experience of a few months before when he had helped a young woman and her lover out of the clutch of enemies. "It was very kind of Mollie, and very good of you, to take all this trouble, but duty compels me to go on. If that is all you have to say, I shall have to bid you good-day, Lonesome Jim."

"It's orful!" exclaimed the other, with genuine earnestness. "What's the use?"

"You have done your duty, Lonesome Jim, and you have our well-earned thanks for it.

"What do you say, Bud, shall we go on or turn back?"

"Jumpin' sandhills! that's what we are here for," replied Ted's companion, who had remained silent during the foregoing conversation.

"You are about as clear in your statements, Bud, as Lonesome Jim. But I never yet turned back in my path, and I am going to follow this."

With these words the young rough rider touched Black Bess lightly, when the bonnie mare moved forward at a steady pace.

"I reckon Bud Morgan don't show the white feather yet," declared that worthy, allowing his bay to follow in the steps of Black Bess.

While Lonesome Jim stood with hands lifted in silent

horror, his gaze following the two riders, he exclaimed under his breath:

"It's orful, but 'tain't my fault. Oh, Lord! whut'll Mollie say, when she knows I've clean failed?"

Then the dissatisfied speaker started to follow the young rough rider and his friend.

But when he had taken a couple of steps he suddenly stopped, and while a wave of terror rushed over his rugged features, he turned and fled down the path as fast as his poor limbs could well carry him.

CHAPTER II.

HOT WORK.

Black Bess pricked up her ears, as her young master once more urged her forward, and she flew along the mountain pathway with light feet.

Ted Strong had restored his revolvers to their natural positions, but his hands were ready to grasp them at an instant's notice, while his vision kept close watch of his surroundings, as he was carried on into what he had every reason to believe was one of the most deadly traps set for man.

The country grew rapidly more broken as he advanced, the very path hemmed in by huge bowlders piled about with a prodigal hand.

Over these towered cliffs and sheer bluffs, while over these still rose the lofty mountains, with their heads swathed in the white linen of the upper regions.

In and around these massive obstructions wound the path.

Now it broadened into a wide, smooth, rock-paved highway, to contract a few rods beyond so it was barely of sufficient breadth for a single horseman to pass along.

In silence, quite unusual to him, Bud Morgan followed his companion, keeping as near to him as possible.

Yet in spite of this caution ever and anon the young rough rider would vanish from his view, to reappear the next moment dashing over one of the glassy floors dropped here amidst this scene of rugged grandeur.

Over all hung a deathlike silence, broken only by the steady hoof beats of the animals ridden by the venturesome twain, who knew only too well they were taking their lives in their hands by entering into this region.

In the midst of his advance, Ted Strong suddenly became aware of that peculiar, hollow sound sent up by the hoof strokes of Black Bess, as if the bonnie mare was passing over a thin floor covering some cavity in the earth.

Scarcely had the young rough rider made this discovery before the pointed ears of Black Bess suddenly stood straight up, and he felt her body quiver.

Then he realized that the rock beneath her feet was sinking!

An ordinary rider would have pulled suddenly on the reins, and thus brought the mare to stop upon the danger spot.

Long experience had shown him that it was better to let the sagacious creature look after herself.

This proved to be the wise course this time.

With a loud snort she bounded upward, and while the rough ledge dropped away from under her feet, she reached solid footing just beyond.

Glancing back, Ted saw to his horror that a wide opening had appeared in the pathway.

The rock over which he had ridden a moment before now stood edgewise, having apparently turned half over, leaving a yawning pit on either side.

How deep this was he could only speculate, for in the brief interval that he looked into it he saw no bottom, though his gaze reached downward more than a hundred feet.

Witnessing this strange thing, Bud Morgan was about to pull up his horse, when, suddenly, without the least warning, like a series of lightning bolts from a clear sky, a dozen rifle reports rang out, making a long line of sheeted flame!

A dozen bullets whistled about the head of the rough rider, more than one bringing blood.

One struck the neck of his horse, and another its chest.

Smarting from the pain of these wounds, the horse reared upon its hind feet, striking madly at the empty air with its forefeet.

Then, before Bud could have checked its flight if he had wished, the powerful beast bounded forward.

Reaching the rim of the chasm, and seeing Black Bess on the further side, another volley of bullets singing through the air, the bay gathered its forces for a mighty spring over the rent in the pathway.

Holding firmly to his seat, with the bullets of his unseen enemies flying about his head, Bud felt himself lifted high into the air, and carried forward at a terrific rate.

Making a curve in its wonderful flight, the gallant bay leaped fairly over the place, to land almost beside Black Bess, which her rider had checked, for the moment, from further flight.

"Jumpin' sandhills!" yelled Bud, "ain't this flyin'? Who says——"

The sharp reports of the rifles from the foes in concealment, and the whistle and rattle of bullets filled the air.

And mingling with these angry sounds rang the clear, trumpet-like tone of the young rough rider's rifle, as he sent shot after shot into the thicket, ablaze with the fire of the enemy.

Seeing the safe passage of Bud over the chasm, he turned in his seat, and, shouting an encouraging word to Black Bess, he rode hotly along the dangerous passway.

The clatter of the bay's hoofs told him that Bud was in mad pursuit, while the firing of their foes speedily grew duller.

But the bold young rough rider had not fled in this exciting manner more than twenty rods, before he abruptly found his course stopped by a wide, deep canyon running completely across the path.

Some time, not long since, this had been spanned by a chain bridge, but now the great gash in the rocky side of the mountain was uncovered and impassable.

Far down its rocky sides rolled and tumbled a river, sending up a dull thunder from its dark depths.

At the same moment, wild, exultant yells came from the concealed riflemen, who had now sprung forth into the path behind the daring riders, frenzied with triumph over their anticipated easy capture of the entrapped twain.

Escape cut off, and only death ahead, the brave rough riders must have felt that they were lost.

Bud Morgan's sharp voice rang above the tumult, as he shouted:

"Give the infernal coyotes hot shot," wheeling in his saddle to pour shot after shot into their midst.

Ted Strong had come to realize the situation in so brief a while that the onward sweep of Black Bess was not checked in the least.

He quickly resolved upon a bold venture.

It was a wild leap for life.

Gathering the reins tighter upon the bit of the black mare, to help steady her in the fearful undertaking ahead, he shouted to Bud:

"Jump the chasm, Bud. On for your life!"

It was in truth on for his life.

Black Bess seemed to know what was wanted of her.

The bonnie black steed showed that she did not lack the will to make the wild leap for life.

As she swept down to the edge of the chasm, she crouched for a moment close to the earth.

The next instant, just as her shod hoofs reached the brink, she rose bodily into the air, carrying her rider into space, and out over to the canyon.

The yelling from the mob in pursuit suddenly ceased.

At the very moment when it had expected to complete its capture with apparent ease, it found its prey slipping away.

But such was their amazement that no man among the motley band thought to fire a shot.

One and all looked with strained vision expecting to see horse and rider sink suddenly out of sight—disappear forever in the sullen waters below.

But bonnie Black Bess had not come to the end of her race.

Her dark form seemed to be borne upon unseen wings for a moment, and before the watchers could realize that she had actually flown over the chasm, she struck upon the further bank, her steel-shod hoofs sending up clouds of sparks as they grated and slipped upon the rock.

The next moment she was safe and sound on the opposite cliff.

Huzzas of triumph rang from the young rough rider, while he turned in his seat to watch the flight of Bud Morgan.

The bay seemed encouraged by the daring feat of its mate, and as its rider shouted his word of encouragement, it prepared for its awful leap.

Bud felt the muscles of the noble animal contract, while it gave vent to a furious snort, half of terror, half of desperation.

The rough-dressed men in the background forgot now the escape of the foremost of the bold riders, and gazed with open-mouthed wonder upon this second attempt.

Had the steeds of the venturesome comers wings that they dared and escaped these pitfalls?

They had just seen this same powerful horse leap the first trap in its pathway, a feat they had never witnessed before.

Now they watched this greater deed.

As Black Bess had done, the bay bounded high into the air, hanging for a moment like a speck upon the wall of space.

With a feeling of excitement that could not be described, Bud Morgan kept his seat, preparing, as best he could in that swift interval, for the shock of landing.

Then the quivering form of the horse began to descend, and his forefeet struck squarely upon the rock, giving the impression to the distant onlookers that he had made the passage in safety.

But Bud felt the noble form quiver as it had not before. A half-stifled whinny came from the foaming lips, while the horse struck madly forward to make another advance.

But its rear feet only hit against the side of the rock wall.

It had missed by a hand's span!

In vain the bay tried to gain what it had lost.

It struggled frantically to keep its hold on the brink.

But, in spite of its wild efforts, it continued to slip backward, streams of fire marking the tracks of its iron heels.

Bud, himself, was frightened, and he cried aloud for help—the help Ted Strong was powerless to give him.

Backward, downward, faster and faster, went the struggling bay, in spite of its mighty efforts to cling to the rock.

The bank shelved away where it had struck, so its fall was not swift and clear, but it was none the less certain.

"Leap for your life, Bud—into the river!" cried the young rough rider, managing to throw off the terrible spell of the awful sight so as to utter this warning cry.

As the ringing words cleft the air, the heroic bay, with a look human in its depth of agony in the big, staring eyes, went down—down, swiftly lost to the sight of the dumfounded watchers.

CHAPTER III.

THE PATH OF PERILS.

As the doomed bay went crashing into the canyon, the sun-beaten countenance of Bud Morgan, looking white and ghastly in its fright, was upturned for a moment, while he was carried down by his struggling horse.

Then the young rough rider, who was watching the tragedy with bated breath, saw his friend spring out clear from the entanglements of the saddle, and drop from sight.

All this, which has taken so many words to describe, took place in a moment.

Since Ted Strong and his companion had ridden wildly upon this death trap to now, when the wild cry of Bud mingled with the shrill neigh of his horse, had not occupied a minute.

But such a minute as the young rough rider would not be likely to forget for many a day.

He had come here expecting adventure, but nothing like this.

Black Bess had paused a short distance from the brink of the canyon, and now stood trembling in every limb, showing that she, too, had felt and realized the awful effort that had so recently been put forth, and the fearful fate of her mate and its rider.

Urging her forward, against her inclinations, to the edge of the chasm, Ted gazed hurriedly into the depths, hoping to catch sight of his friend.

He discovered the form of the poor horse, which had been caught up by the swirling flood, as it was carried away upon its surface, a lifeless thing.

He looked in vain for any sign of his friend.

By this time, the rough crowd upon the distant shelf of rock had recovered somewhat from its feelings of mingled rage and dismay.

"Shoot him down, boys!" commanded a hoarse voice from the rear.

His own situation now brought clearly to his mind, the young rough rider, who had dismounted, quickly raised his rifle, taking deliberate aim at the foremost of the gang of ruffians.

"Stand where you are," cried the brave youth. "I have the drop on you."

"But we are twenty to your one," replied the leader of the outlaws.

"That may all be very true," retorted the undaunted Ted, "but what do I care for the score of you? Were you two score I would still laugh at you."

"Ye had better surrender, younker."

"If you want me, come and get me."

"We'll get yer yet. No man ever got through Dead Man's Pass."

"A boy may. I do not know where the boundaries are fixed, but it looks to me that I am pretty nearly through it now."

The outlaw laughed, but it was a cry of derision rather than one of triumph.

Ted was far from feeling like exulting, knowing that he had lost one of the truest friends a man ever had, but he resolved to put on a bold front.

The path for several rods away was exposed to the fire of his enemies, but he decided to make the attempt to get away, knowing that pursuit on the part of his foes was

cut off by the canyon, which in this respect, at least, was to his advantage.

Still keeping his aim fixed upon the crowd across the canyon, the young rough rider swung himself into the saddle, when Black Bess pricked up her ears.

"Away!" said Ted, softly, to his best friend at that time.

The mare immediately started forward, which movement was the signal for the outlaws to renew their fire.

"Don't let him get away!" cried the leader.

He had barely finished his sentence when a puff of smoke curled outward from the muzzle of the young rough rider's rifle, and then he staggered back into the arms of his nearest companions.

"Osbon's shot!" yelled one of the outlaws.

Without further loss of time the entire gang poured a volley after the fleeing horseman.

But he had obtained in the brief interval of delay a start that took him beyond the range of their weapons, which were discharged with more haste than accuracy.

Though some of the bullets hissed uncomfortably near to his head, Ted Strong could well laugh defiantly back upon his assailants, while he sent a parting shot into their midst.

The howl of pain which followed, told plainer than words that he had fired with better aim than the whole of them.

A moment later the young rough rider was borne around a shoulder of rock, and out of the sight of the maddened crowd upon the brink of the chasm.

But if taken beyond the immediate peril of one party of enemies, the brave young rough rider was carried with every step of Black Bess into another.

As he flew along the descending path, winding in and out of the broken country, he realized that there might be yet another trap set for him. He did not believe such a cunning band of men, who had placed about this wild mountain pass such a reputation, would depend solely upon one means of protection.

Yet, if such thoughts as these were in his mind, the abruptness with which he found himself again in the midst of armed foes would have been sufficient to have nonplused a less sanguine and energetic person.

Black Bess was fairly flying along the path, when suddenly it was blocked by a dozen stalwart figures, clad from head to foot in garbs as dark as her own black coat.

The faces of these huge assailants each wore the mask of a grinning skeleton countenance, lending a frightful appearance to the somber forms.

Half a dozen powerful hands closed upon the straps and reins of the bridle, the united efforts of the men pulling the stout mare back upon her haunches.

In vain she struggled to free herself from the hands laid upon the bridle.

Ted Strong was almost unhorsed, so swift and certain was the fierce onset.

The muzzles of twelve Colt revolvers looked into his face, while as many more outlaws, clad like their companions already lined up in the attack, leaped from the bushes and bowlders to mingle in the wild fray.

For a moment it looked as if the young rough rider had found more than his match.

With his steed plunging hopelessly in the clutch of their enemies, Ted saw that the first thing was to give her her freedom.

With a hasty aim he fired at the head strap of the bridle.

His shot was successful.

The bridle, strained by the great force brought to bear upon it, parted with a loud snap.

The wild rabble clinging to it suddenly dropped under the feet of the mare.

She threw up her head with a defiant snort that bore the ring of unmistakable exultation.

She was free once more!

Spurning the struggling mass of humanity beneath her iron heels as she would have driven over so many sods of earth, trampling more than one down never to rise again, the gallant Black Bess bounded forward.

Swinging around in his seat, the young rough rider fired a parting salute into the midst of the discomfited horde, who suddenly found their victim slipping away from them.

But Ted Strong's liberty was of short duration.

Even the wonderful sagacity of Black Bess, or his own swift perception of danger, failed to discover to him the new peril environing the pathway of Dead Man's Pass.

Just what caught him he could not tell at the time, but in the height of Black Bess' flight, he felt himself suddenly lifted upward with a force that took away his breath, while the mare continued to sweep down the pathway with the speed of the wind.

Lifted high into the air with the force of a gigantic

catapult, he had a vague realization of flying through space, and then all became dark to him, though during the brief experience he could hear the shod hoofs of Black Bess, as she sped down the pathway.

CHAPTER IV.

TED TELEPHONES TO HIS ENEMIES.

Slowly, and with a dull pain in his head, the young rough rider recovered his consciousness.

Upon starting up on one elbow he looked around him, to find that the night had closed in upon the mountain scene.

As far as he could see he was surrounded by a forest, broken in places by the uneven exterior of the earth and huge bowlders thrown about in promiscuous array.

Reaching out his hand in the manner of one at a loss to know where he is, he found that less than a foot removed from him was the brink of a pit of unknown depth.

This, he soon found, extended nearly around him.

Not a sound broke the silence of the darkness, except in the far distance the sharp cry of some marauding beast of the wildwood, in quest of its prey.

Somehow the dismal sound sent a shiver through his frame.

Then he fell to wondering what had become of Black Bess.

"I must up and be at work," he thought, gaining his feet, though he felt a stiffness in his limbs as well as a soreness upon his head.

"I must have been tossed several yards into the air," he mused. "Probably it was expected I was to fall into this hole in the earth. It was a narrow miss, but a miss is as good as a mile they say, so I must not stop to think of what might have been."

With extreme caution Ted moved through the growth, carefully feeling his way for fear he should stumble upon another of the many traps that seem to have been set in that vicinity for the unwary.

"I wonder if anyone else of the many who have been lost in this place of mystery has ever got as far as I have," he pondered, as he stopped to try and get a wider view of his surroundings.

What caught his attention first was a long, dark line extending through the forest which looked to him like a high wall, erected to stop further progress in that direction.

His next move was to solve this truth, which proved to be a truth indeed.

"Looks as if they had built a wall the Chinese might have envied around their domains," he thought. "Must think considerable of their claim, which, as far as I have been able to see, is little more than a mass of rocks. There is no accounting for one's tastes."

He followed slowly along this wall for a few rods, when he came to a massive gate, standing between two granite columns.

Before reaching this, he was warned of the presence of another by the steady tread of a man pacing back and forth in front of the place, like a sentry on duty.

With renewed caution the young rough rider advanced until he was near the upper end of the beat of this unsuspecting sentinel, who was humming softly a love ditty while he made his lonely beat.

"It must be the boys hev found a long chase in running down that black horse," he muttered. "Th' cap'n said he should not be gone more'n ten minnits. I'll 'low it has been fifteen now. There goes thet blamed telephone again. Th' boss at t'other end must be in a hurry, fer this is th' third time he's dinged th' bell within es menny minnits."

The low tinkle of a bell, apparently on the other side of the wall, now fell upon the ears of the young rough rider.

He at once judged it was the telephone signal hinted at by the sentry in his low speech addressed to himself.

That a telephone could be in existence in that locality was something of a surprise, but Ted Strong was used to surprises.

The paramount thought in his mind was the determination to investigate this handy device to be found even in the mountains of the wild West.

No sooner was this conclusion reached than he resolved upon his course of action.

Creeping still nearer, while the back of his intended victim was turned, he lay in wait for him the moment he should return to this part of his beat.

He didn't have to wait long.

The disguised sentinel, for he wore the strange garb of those who had assailed the young rough rider, seemed impatient in his march, and inside of a minute he was directly opposite the concealed scout.

The next he knew a pair of strong arms closed about him, and a hand was placed over his mouth.

"Keep still, if you value your life," whispered Ted, as he bore the other to the earth.

This did not prove a very difficult matter, for the man did not offer any particular resistance.

The captor then removed the big, black cloak which covered the man from head to foot, and, laying this aside, he bound him securely, and placed a gag in his mouth. Then he put on this disguise.

This accomplished, he opened the following one-sided dialogue:

"I want to ask you a few questions. While doing it, I shall hold my revolver against your temple. If I think you are lying to me, or I hear anybody coming likely to interrupt me, I shall send a ball through your brain. Such questions as you answer in the affirmative, nod your head; in the negative, shake your head. Do you understand?"

The captive outlaw nodded his head.

"Good. Now, is that telephone inside the gate?"

The other nodded.

"Have you the fastening to the gate?"

Another nod.

"A key?"

Again he nodded.

"In your pocket?"

A nod.

The young rough rider then began a search for the key, which he was fortunate enough to find in the first pocket he entered.

"Is the man ringing that bell one of your gang?"

A nod.

"Is he this side of the canyon?"

For the first time the outlaw shook his head.

"On the other, then?"

A nod.

"Is he the chief of this band?"

A nod.

"How many members have you in this precious gang? If twenty-five, nod."

The other nodded.

"Fifty?"

He shook his head again.

"The band is divided into two companies?"

A nod.

"This squad has gone in quest of that black horse ridden by the young man who entered here this afternoon?"

Another nod.

"Likely to come back any moment?"

A nod.

"That is all now. Don't worry over your troubles."

The young rough rider now turned his attention to unlocking the gate, which was accomplished quicker than he had anticipated.

As the heavy structure swung inward at his push, the telephone bell, louder than ever, rang on Ted's hearing.

The man at the other end was getting impatient.

Glancing around to see that he had entered a prison-like inclosure of perhaps half an acre in extent, the young rough rider stepped forward in the direction from whence had come the sound of the bell.

Though it was dark within the place, he had little difficulty in finding his way to the desired spot, when he found himself before the speaking tube.

Placing his lips to the orifice, he said:

"Hello!"

At the same time he raised the receiver to his ear.

"Is that you, Jackson?" was the quick response.

"Yes," replied the young rough rider, purposely giving a gruff sound to his voice, hazarding his chancing upon imitating the man who was supposed to be in his place.

"Why didn't you answer me before?" demanded the person in the distance.

"Couldn't get here."

"Anything gone wrong?"

"No. But that blamed horse gave us a rousing chase."

"Did you get that young rough rider?"

"Yes."

"What have you done with him?"

"Reckon we don't have to do with him. He did for himself. He plunked into that hole dug for him."

"What is the trouble with your voice to-night, Jackson. It does not sound right."

"It's the wire. Voice is all right. Yours sounds strange to me. I am not sure if I am talking to you, chief, or to Jones."

"It is I, the chief. The line does not work well. Has not since that blooming New Yorker got twisted up in it."

"Got him safe yet?"

"You can bet your bottom dollar on that. Too much depending on him."

"Hear anything from his folks?"

"Yes, Simpkins telegraphed to-day they are willing to

pay fifty thousand dollars. But I still hold for one hundred thousand. He's worth it, and they have got the rocks to pay. Blast them, they shall, too. Simpkins is playing a still hand. He'll win."

"Good. Keep a stiff upper lip."

"Trust Nate Hammerston for that. Say, there was a chap with the young rough rider to-day, who has been seen alive in the canyon since he fell in."

"Sho!" exclaimed Ted, while a thrill of pleasure at this intelligence went through his frame. Then Bud had not been killed! "How long ago was he seen?"

"A little while. Was clinging to a tree which had fallen into the gorge. But he can't hang there a great while. The men who saw him did not think it necessary to waste a shot on him."

"Of course not. Where was he seen?"

"A furlong below where he fell into the river."

"Speaking of Morrice, the New Yorker, do you think you have got him safe where he is?"

"I should like to see a man get at him. He's bound and gagged, and in 'the tomb,' with four men constantly on duty. Doesn't that look as though we meant business?"

"As usual, Nate. You're a sharp one, though we must not lose sight of the fact that this New Yorker has proved a pretty tough case."

"Oh, we've got him safe's a nut in a shell."

"Say, Jackson, keep your eye peeled for a suspicious character wandering about somewhere within our bounds. I don't see how in the name of kingdom come he got in. But he has been seen twice within an hour. Of course the boys will soon run him to earth. But it stands us in hand to grab him up before he makes mischief."

"Cert. What is he like?"

"Oh, he doesn't look much. He's past middle life, tall, stoop-shouldered, poorly dressed, and has a squint to his left eye. He may be a fool, as he looks enough like one, but it won't do to let even fools have the run of Dead Man's Pass."

"Bet your boots on that."

At this moment the young rough rider caught the sound of the approach of a body of men, some of whom were mounted.

He knew it would not do for him to remain there any longer.

"Anything more?" he asked of the man at the other end of the line.

"That's all. Be on hand in case I call you up again."

"O. K. I hear the boys coming, and I must go. Good-by."

"Good-by."

CHAPTER V.

THE LOST GORDON MORRICE.

The young rough rider knew it would be hazarding useless perils for him to remain there longer.

The sounds of a body of horsemen approaching near at hand now came distinctly to his ears, and without loss of time he turned away from the telephone and passed out through the gate.

He took the precaution to lock this, but before he could leave the place he found himself confronted by a squad of the outlaws, who had evidently belonged to the party that had gone in pursuit of the fugitive mare.

"Hello, Stebbins!" called out the foremost of the newcomers, "everything O. K.?"

"O. K.," replied Ted, coolly, relying upon his disguise to escape detection.

"Good! it's a devil of a chase we've had after that beast."

"Get her?" asked the young rough rider, laconically, lifting the heavy rifle of the quondam sentinel to his shoulder, and making believe he was about to resume his beat.

Fortunately for him no one seemed to notice the dark figure of the man he had overpowered, though he was lying upon the ground less than a rod distant.

"Get her? No! Her heels are like wings. She fairly flew out of our sight, like the old woman on the broomstick. But she was not worth the trouble we took in finding out we couldn't get her. Still, Jackson was struck on her."

Ted replied in a low tone, while he began to walk back and forth, wondering how he was to elude these sharp-eyed desperadoes.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of the approach of the rest of the gang, whom he judged was led by this important Jackson.

To his relief, the outlaw leader approached the heavy gate, fumbling at the same time in his pocket, as Ted believed, for the key.

"Confound it!" muttered the other, "where is that blamed key?"

"Take mine," offered the young rough rider, at the same time extending the one he had in his possession.

"If I have lost mine the cap'n'll have me shot sure's fate," mumbled the discomfited man, still trying to find the object of his search by continuing his examination into his other pockets.

Ted was now marching slowly back and forth, so shaping his steps that he would be at the further end of the beat by the time Jackson and his squad should arrive on the scene.

The latter was now drawing rapidly near, and the young rough rider felt that every moment was precious to him.

"Ha!" ejaculated the man at the gate, "here's the blamed thing, tucked away in one corner."

The sharp click which followed told that he had applied the key to the lock, and the next moment the gate swung ajar.

At the same moment Jackson and his men dashed upon the scene.

But the young rough rider was already making a hasty retreat, going in a direction which was taking him deeper and deeper into the interior of this strange mountain stronghold of desperadoes.

He heard the gruff demand of the leader of the newcomers as he reached the scene, but the moment later he was out of hearing.

By this time the young rough rider had again come alongside the massive wall, and he continued to follow it, while he advanced, constantly on the watch against a surprise.

He did not escape a surprise, but it was of a different nature from that which was feared by him.

As he progressed the sullen roar of distant water, rolling and tumbling along some rocky gorge, reached faintly his ears, and when this had become plainer he suddenly found himself at the beginning of a tier of what looked to him in the dim light of the night scene to be a natural stairway leading downward into the unknown regions below—perhaps into the canyon.

Upon closer examination he saw that these steps were the work of both nature and man, the latter having completed what had been begun by the forces of creation.

They were somewhat irregular, wide at places and narrow at others, but they bore the footmarks of many feet passing to and fro from the surface of the ground to the other end, wherever that might be.

With a purpose in view, from which Ted Strong was not to be deterred, he unhesitatingly descended the rough way, step by step, until he had counted fifty.

He was now conscious of coming near to the brink of some deep-volumed stream, when, abruptly, without a moment's warning, the ominous muzzle of a rifle was thrust into his face, while a hoarse voice said, in a low tone:

"Stand! If friend, give the countersign; if foe, die in——"

In the midst of this command the sentinel—for such he was—found himself seized in a stout grasp, and the next moment he was felled to the rock floor with a force which robbed him of his consciousness.

This person was without the black robe and skeleton mask, being clothed in the rough garb of a plainsman.

Knowing discretion must be exercised by him in this pursuit of a dangerous quest, Ted quickly bound the unconscious outlaw, and then lifted his body up so his back rested against the side of the rock wall.

A moment's time enabled him to make the other appear as if resting against the rock, sitting back somewhat where he would not come into plain view of any chance passer that way.

This done, the young rough rider looked about him to get a better idea of his situation.

He had now reached the foot of the stone stairway and stood upon a narrow shelf of rock overhanging the side of the canyon about midway in its descent.

The roar of the river now drowned all minor sounds.

The chasm was spanned here by a bridge made of small poles laid upon chains stretched from side to side of the canyon.

The darkness which had filled the gloomy stairway was here partly dispelled by the light of the glimmering stars looking feebly down into this wild retreat.

On the opposite bank of the gorge Ted saw a dark orifice at the end of the bridge, which he felt certain must lead into the other stronghold of the outlawed band, whose surroundings were among the strangest he had ever found in his varied experiences.

Without stopping to see more he advanced swiftly over the swaying structure, which creaked ominously beneath his hurried steps.

But nothing occurred to obstruct his passage, and shortly he stood at the further end, peering into the darkness ahead of him.

There were no steps on this side, and he felt confident the dark passageway led into some interior chamber,

where it was more than possible he would find the outlaw band.

Ted Strong's mission was an important one.

It related to the life of at least one young man in the prime of life, and the happiness of a whole household, to say nothing of the anxiety of many friends.

A few months before, this young man, whose name was Gordon Morrice, while upon a pleasure trip through the West for a needed rest from his active duties in New York City, suddenly and mysteriously disappeared.

He had with him two companions at the time, and these disappeared with him.

So the weeks dragged along without bringing any word from him.

His father and mother began to look upon him as dead.

Detectives were hired to find him, or learn the nature of the fate which had befallen him, but they searched in vain.

While these men were giving up their work a note without signature was left at the office of Mr. Morrice, senior, saying that his son was living.

He was inclined to look upon this as a hoax, but a few days later another missive, in the same handwriting, was left him saying that for the consideration of one hundred thousand dollars his son would be restored to him, alive and unharmed.

This note, with the first, Mr. Morrice placed in the hands of officials, with the order not to spare any effort in tracing it down.

The bereaved family were now wrought into a deep intensity of grief, though its head still clung to the belief it was only a hoax to get money from him.

But if the father and mother were skeptical there was one who was not.

This was Gordon Morrice's sweetheart, pretty, energetic Marian Dolloff.

She believed her lover had been kidnaped by a band of mountain bandits who, knowing his parents were wealthy, were holding him for the big ransom demanded.

The detectives in the West were notified of the situation at home and urged to redouble their efforts.

But day after day went by without affording any clew to the mystery.

Nothing could be found of Gordon Morrice or his abductors, if he had really been captured.

While this fruitless search was being carried on quietly, so as not to awaken the spite of the outlaws, each day brought some communication relative to the ransom demanded.

As they continued to come they grew more and more threatening, until it was declared that Gordon Morrice should not live more than another week unless the sum demanded was paid over at once.

This so alarmed the family that even Mr. Morrice grew desperate and doubled the reward offered.

Acting upon advice, in the hope of giving time for further action, a promise of twenty-five thousand was made.

This offer was soon afterward doubled, but the mysterious abductors remained as firm as ever.

The health of Mr. Morrice would not admit of his taking such an exciting trip, even could it do any good, but Miss Dolloff determined to start at once in search of her lost lover.

She was accompanied by her brother, who was an ardent friend of young Morrice.

Of course this couple had only the most vague clew to follow and they could only seek the locality where Gordon had been last seen.

Unfortunately, before this place was reached, George Dolloff was seized with a severe illness, which not only prevented him from continuing the search, but also distracted his sister.

At this critical stage of the trying experience Miss Dolloff heard of the young rough rider, who had just come into town upon business of his own.

Without stopping to send for him to come to her, she sought him.

He listened with deep interest to the pathetic story told by this beautiful girl, who promised him unbounded reward if he would undertake to find her lover before it was too late.

The matter of a reward Ted Strong quickly put aside and asked her to say no more of it.

He then requested her to give him the full particulars of the case, which she did with new-found hope, as she gained his respectful attention.

When she had finished the young rough rider gladly promised to do all in his power to save young Gordon Morrice if he was living, or to learn his fate if he was dead.

"But you think he is living?" she asked, lifting her tear-wet countenance to wait for his reply.

"I haven't any doubt of that, Miss Dolloff, though I would not hold out any false hopes to you."

"You think they will kill him before you can find him?" she cried, holding up her hands in despair.

"On the contrary, it looks to me as if he was worth more alive than dead to these men who have played a bold hand in a most cunning manner. It only remains for us to find him."

"Do you think we had better pay the ransom they demand? While his father is worth considerable money, he is not nearly as rich as he is thought to be, and I am sure it would bankrupt the family. Mine are not rich enough to help them, even if it was right we should."

"Do not pay the rascals a dollar at present. It might be well to increase the offer of a ransom, but be careful to keep it within bounds. Such a course would give us more time in which to act."

"How soon do you think you can bring me, or send me, tidings of him?"

"Within three days, Miss Dolloff. Go back and look after your brother, and expect to hear from me within that time."

"You give me great hope and comfort, Mr. Strong, but three days seems a long time for me to wait."

"I will do the best I can."

"I know it, sir. God grant you success."

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH DANCE.

Having made known the object of the young rough rider's still hunt into this wild region, we will follow him in his further adventures, where every step led him deeper and deeper into the meshwork of deadly perils.

He advanced now with silent steps along the stone floor.

The passage at places was twenty feet wide, while at others it narrowed to one-half of that distance.

Its height varied less, for at no place did he believe it was more than ten feet.

He followed his course by keeping one hand constantly against the rough wall.

He had gone two hundred feet, he judged, along this path, when it made a sharp turn, and he discovered the glimmer of lights in the distance.

He was now certain he was approaching the haunt of the outlaws.

But he soon found there was another reason for the lights.

The surface of the floor was very uneven here.

Jagged points of rocks here and there stuck up a foot or more in height, making it extremely difficult of passage in the dark.

There were also frequent depressions or hollows in the rock, at two places there being little ponds of stagnant water, which gave forth a foul odor.

These obstructions and rents in the rock floor the young rough rider safely passed, until at last the sound of human voices, hollow and sepulchral in that underground retreat, broke the oppressive silence of the place.

It was light enough here for Ted to note his surroundings with considerable distinctness.

Among other things that he noticed he saw that the telephone followed this passage, and he realized how easy it would be for him to sever connections with the outside rendezvous of the band if it was necessary for him.

The next moment he found himself looking upon a strange sight.

The passage here suddenly opened into a large chamber with domelike walls and ceiling, the center rising to a height of twenty-five feet.

This singular underground amphitheater was lighted by a row of brilliant torches set in the natural wall, giving a weird, fantastic effect to the picturesque scene, which could not be surpassed for its novelty.

The glare of these lights was reflected in a thousand places by the shimmer and luster of rich veins of silver and gold running through the rock, while there were rich purple tints and bright red of other minerals abounding in the rock-bound earth.

Near the center of this underground chamber was a raised dais or platform of several feet in diameter, and standing about four feet from the floor.

Near the center of this, upon a divan covered with rich furs, sat a man of middle age, strong of limb and massive of feature.

His coal-black hair hung in profusion about his broad shoulders, while the ends of his enormous mustaches met this mass upon either side. The last were as dark of hue as the raven's wing.

His most marked feature, however, were the piercing black eyes peering out from under heavy, overhanging eyebrows, looking, as ever and anon he glanced about him, like twin bolts of lightning leaping from frowning thunderheads in a storm-laden sky.

Just then his attention was wholly occupied in watching a column of moving figures, enveloped from head to foot in the same sort of dark robe that the young rough rider had taken from the sentry outside this cavernous retreat.

Hideous masks, supposed to represent the skeleton features of the dead, covered the face of each of these moving satellites of his Satanic Majesty.

As they moved grimly forward they made a rattling sound, like so many creatures with hoofs.

And this was in reality the case, as Ted quickly discovered, each man having upon his feet the hoofs of a buffalo.

The file was marching slowly and solemnly around the dais or throne of the leader of these diabolical desperadoes.

"Halt!" abruptly called out the chief.

The word was no quicker given than the masked men obeyed, stopping short in their advance.

"Right about face!" thundered the commander.

As if turned upon a pivot run by a single machine the column wheeled about and stood grinning, like so many demons, upon him at their head.

"Good!" commented the chief. "You're in fine trim to make the 'death dance.'"

"But before we begin that I have good news to tell you, my bold hearties. They have raised the ransom on that New Yorker twenty-five thousand—doubled it since our last dance."

A low cheer greeted this announcement, the chorus of voices echoed against the walls and flung far away into their inmost recesses. Then, when it seemed as if the sounds had died away, they were reproduced on the opposite side and repeated again and again.

"I knew you would be pleased over that. But we do not propose to take less than our original price—a cool one hundred thousand."

This announcement brought forth a second outburst of applause, which was louder than the first, and in proportion more deafening in its repeating echoes.

"I would not have let you done that yesterday," declared the chief. "But Jackson has just telephoned me that they have buried that daredevil of a young rough rider who was seen in the morning hovering about Dead Man's Pass.

"It will take more than one Ted Strong to solve the mystery of Dead Man's Pass."

A third cheer, with less enthusiasm than the others, followed this statement. Then the chief went on:

"I have ordered that New Yorker to be brought up from the tomb, as I have a little work for him to do. I want him to play our trump card. It is not always the enemy can help you in the trick, but we—— Fires and furies! what's up now?"

The last query was called forth by the sound of a struggle in the distance and the call of some one in danger.

The young rough rider had been the first to catch this new cause for attention.

While one and all of the outlaws waited and watched in breathless silence, heavy footsteps came nearer and nearer, and then two men, dragging a third, burst into view from one of the many interior passages.

The captors, it could be seen at a glance, were a couple of the band of outlaws.

The captive was quickly recognized by Ted Strong as the singular man who had tried to dissuade him from entering Dead Man's Pass, Lonesome Jim.

The latter did not seem to be making any particular resistance to the twain who had captured him, though he made them half carry him along, while he whistled "Yankee Doodle" between his fingers.

"Who have you got there?" demanded Chief Hammerston of the captors.

"A chap we found hangin' round hyurerbout," replied one of them. "But I'll be durned and burned 'f I can tell whether he's a bloomin' ijit or a fool!"

"How in thunder did he get inside, anyway?" asked Hammerston, showing evident alarm in his looks as well as by his words.

"Durned and burned 'f I know, chief. Th' fust we know'd we see him a-peekin' inter the canyon like a toad lookin' in a bottle."

"You know that my orders are never to let a man step inside the Pass. This scurvy fellow is the second one you have let in to-day. As soon as I have settled with him and have looked after another little matter, I will see that some one is punished for this."

As he finished his threat the two captors cowered with greater fright than was displayed by the prisoner they had brought before the judge.

In fact, Lonesome Jim was showing any feeling but that of fright. He was nonchalantly chewing a piece of wood which he had picked up, and stood swinging himself on one foot, while he stared stupidly around him.

"Queerest night dresses I ever see," he muttered, and then nearly strangled himself in trying to shift the stick from one side of his mouth to the other.

He had been looking, without any apparent show of surprise, at the row of odd-looking figures drawn up in front of the chief.

"Who in blazes are you?" demanded Hammerston, savagely, while he glowered down upon the lone captive.

Lonesome Jim merely glanced at him, muttering:

"Who be you?"

Hammerston fairly roared with rage at this impertinent reply.

If Lonesome Jim noticed it he was apparently too stupid to know that he was standing upon a volcano.

"Answer me, or by the eternal fates I'll roast you alive."

"Reckon I'd burn up afore ye got through," said Jim, giving the stick in his mouth another turn.

"Chicken's liver!" exclaimed the captive, suddenly clapping his hand to his mouth, 'I've bu'sted my jaw to pieces. I'll——"

"Silence, you shadow of death, or I'll knock off your head in the twinkling of an eye. Look at me."

Lonesome Jim did as he was told.

"Where did you come from?"

"Hum!"

"Where's your home?"

"Where I belong."

Hammerston turned livid with rage.

"Are you a fool or a knave?" he demanded next.

"Leave thet with ye, mister."

"You may leave more with me than you will wish. For the last time, tell me what you are here for?"

" 'Cos I was brought here by 'em chaps. I didn't want er come a bit."

"Do you know that another trifling answer like that will cost you your life?"

"Say, mister," spoke up the other, a look of intelligence for the first time coming over his seamed and scarred features, "it's yer under jaw that does all the work when ye talk—ain't it?"

The confederates of Hammerston, who had stood silent and motionless during the brief dialogue, now looked toward their chief, expecting he would instantly order the stranger to be shot.

The dark countenance of Nathan Hammerston, the outlaw and lawbreaker, did take on an unwonted blackness, but it soon passed away, and his lips were seen to part with a disdainful laugh.

"He's dead gone sure. But don't give him any privileges. We'll see if we can't find something for him to do in a few minutes."

CHAPTER VII.

A TERRIBLE TEST.

Turning from Lonesome Jim with a wave of his hand, Hammerston said:

"Now bring forth that New Yorker, and we will see if he has any more wits than this fool."

Four of the outlaws thereupon retired, the rest remaining in a line in front of their chief.

The four were not gone long on their errand, but it was time enough for the young rough rider, in his concealment, to take a better survey of his environments.

He now saw that among the passages leading from the great chamber was one trending to the right, which had a bright ending. This spot, he believed, proved that it led out into the open air.

While he was speculating upon the condition of affairs the four outlaws returned, leading in their midst the man the young rough rider had come to rescue.

Though haggard from his sufferings, mentally as well as bodily, he was a young man of fine physique, and he came into the presence of his captor with a defiant air.

"I have heard from your people, Gordon Morrice," said Hammerston, without any beating about the bush.

"I dare say," replied the prisoner. "I trust they are well."

"They have raised their bid."

"I am sorry to hear that," replied Morrice, with the same calm demeanor. "Father cannot afford it."

"It seems you do not put a very high valuation on yourself," retorted the outlaw, spitefully.

"Not in my present position, certainly. But if you have nothing else to say to me you might as well take me back to that accursed den."

"So you are beginning to like it," sneered Hammerston. "I have something else to say to you, sir. I have a paper for you to sign."

"I am not certain that I shall sign it."

"The worst will be your own if you do not."

Gordon Morrice made no reply to this. To the keen gaze of the concealed young rough rider he was mentally calculating on his chances of escape.

The bonds upon his lower limbs had been loosened to allow him to walk to this place, but his hands were still securely bound behind him. His guard stood constantly by his side, ready at the least move on his part to seize him.

"You do not seem to realize the worry and excitement your prolonged absence has created. Your mother has become so hysterical that it requires two watchers and the almost constant attendance of a doctor to care for her. Your father——"

"Hold, infamous wretch! if it is for this—to torment me—you had better left me where I was. I will listen to none of it. As if you have not already heaped insult and injury sufficient upon me. Take me back to my den."

"Better be careful what you say, Gordon Morrice. Were it not for this money I would rend you limb from limb. As it is I will get the money and then have the satisfaction of meting out to you my vengeance."

"You are capable of it," replied Morrice, showing wonderful nerve to bear up under such treatment.

"A truce to this foolish argument," said Hammerston, after a moment's pause. "If you will sign the paper I have here, which is simply a request on your part for your father to pay over the hundred thousand without longer delay, I will promise you your freedom within an hour after the ransom is in my hands."

"Never," replied the prisoner, lowly, but firmly. "Father has not got the money to pay that sum."

"He could easily raise it."

"He shall not."

"Then there are the Dolloffs."

"Who would not pay any money for such an infamous purpose as to play into your hands."

"Enough of this child's play," declared Hammerston. "I'll bring you to my terms yet.

"Here, men, place the prisoner over there against that

corner. Then stand that fool over near the opposite corner. Look sharp, every one of you, that this New Yorker does not give you the slip. By the eternal hills, if you let him slip through your fingers I will visit the worst punishment upon you I can imagine. Move lively in the work."

Used to obeying with fear and trembling, the confederates of Hammerston quickly carried out his orders.

To make their purpose doubly certain they took the precaution to restore the ligatures to the ankles of Morrice.

Unobserved by them, however, he managed to stand with his feet so far apart that when they had left, the bonds, by bringing them together, were somewhat loose.

The guardians of Lonesome Jim did not think it worth while to put any bonds upon him.

In fact, it would not have been practicable to have done so, in order to allow him perform the part Hammerston had planned for him.

Lonesome Jim stood a few yards removed from the left of the young rough rider, who was watching this scene with intense interest.

Gordon Morrice stood nearly sidewise to the concealed youth.

"Now prepare for the death dance!" cried Hammerston. "Up and at it, boys.

"While you keep time and step to his work I want to see this idiotic numskull pick a fly from the New Yorker's nose."

A burst of delight came from the masked men, while they formed into line.

Hammerston went to one corner of the chamber, where he found a little soft earth of a clayey nature. Molding this into a small globe, he moistened it and then stuck it to the end of Gordon Morrice's nose.

"I wouldn't ask for any better mark," he said, with a grim laugh, as he stepped back out of the range.

"Now, old man, I want to see you pick that patch of clay off of that man's nose. Just imagine it is a fly and you will do him a favor by removing it."

"Try and not scratch his handsome nose, or you might disfigure his mug so his best girl will throw him over. You know he is here only on trial during good behavior, and we have got to send him back. But, mind you, fetch that fly in three shots or we will try the same game on you

"Ready, men, for the dance?"

"Ready!" came from a score of husky throats, the word sounding harsh and ominous as it was uttered behind those terrible visages.

Then began one of the wildest orgies imaginable. At one side two would-be musicians began to beat together sticks selected for the purpose, their clatter adding to the confusion and strangeness of the antics of the actors.

While these "dancers" were preparing for their part, Hammerston placed a rifle in the hands of Lonesome Jim, who held it as gingerly as he might a stick of dynamite.

"When I give the word 'Fire,'" he commanded, "mind that you hit the mark."

"How shall I hit it?" asked the trembling Jim, holding the weapon at arm's length. "My ma'am never——"

"Shoot! shoot!" cried Hammerston. "I'll show you how it is done."

Seizing a handy firearm he cocked the weapon and took hasty aim at the frightened Jim, who uttered a wild cry and sank upon the rock.

By this time the dancers had begun their part and were leaping, tumbling, plunging, but presenting a gloomy aspect as they turned around and around. Now one leaped into the air, while another beside him dropped close to the rocky floor. Another would keep churning up and down, while he kept step with his comrades.

Every man carried a short rifle, which he flourished in the air, while he gave utterance to the most unearthly yells ever heard. Taken altogether, it was as demoniacal as that evil genius of desperadoes, Hammerston, could have desired.

If he thought to intimidate his captives by this display it would appear that he had half succeeded.

Lonesome Jim sank upon his knees and began to beg for his life, his liberty, and to be spared a part in the fearful program.

Gordon Morrice stood unmoved, looking upon the whole as a miserable farce.

In making their circuits the masked dancers passed near to where the young rough rider was concealed.

Watching his chance, when the chief was engrossed with trying to make Lonesome Jim perform his act, Ted slipped forward and mingled with the mad mob, swinging the rifle he had taken from the sentry outside the cave as high as any of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAMMERSTON GETS EXCITED.

"Take hold of that weapon and bring it to your shoulder!" exclaimed Hammerston. "We shan't get through with this to-night going on at this rate."

"I daresn't take hol' on it!" gasped Jim, shrinking back.

"I'll make you, or break every bone in your body," declared the outlaw.

Lonesome Jim took the weapon gingerly, and somehow, though no one could tell how, he managed to discharge the rifle, when the bullet went hurtling into the dome of the cavern chamber, the report of the firearm filling all that underground apartment with a deep, rumbling noise.

The suddenness of the report caused the dancers to perform some antics not in their order of exercises, while not a few uttered wild howls, in which the sentiment of fear predominated.

Hammerston uttered an exclamation of rage, at the same time dealing the unfortunate Jim a blow which sent him sprawling upon the rock.

"Oh—oh, I'm a goner!" bellowed Lonesome Jim, as he rolled about on the floor, rubbing his head and swinging his heels into the air.

"Blamed idiot!" roared the outlaw. "Get up quick, or you will never get up."

Lonesome Jim managed to regain his feet, though he assumed an upright position three or four yards away from Hammerston.

"Jumpin' sandhills," he cried, "who'd a thought it! Hit ye too?" he asked of Hammerston.

"It only hits fools," retorted the exasperated outlaw. "Get back into place there."

Lonesome Jim slowly shambled back to the spot pointed out by Hammerston.

Then the latter restored to him the rifle.

The dancers had stopped during this side play, but at a signal from one who seemed to be the floor manager, they resumed their unreasonable maneuvers.

Some one now struck up a low chant, in which the others joined until the medley of voices, more noisy than musical, filled the place, adding to the weirdness of the scene.

No one dreaming of his identity, the young rough rider, feeling safe in his disguise, danced as wildly and sang as loudly as any of them.

During this stirring incident, Gordon Morrice had stood an indifferent spectator of the affair, as if it had no concern with him.

In the midst of this suspense on his part he was surprised to hear whispered into his ear:

"Look sharp for friends."

At first he was puzzled to know who had spoken, or whether the voice had come from out of the rock wall, as it appeared to have issued.

The black-robed dancers had swept past him one after another, but he had seen no distinction.

But a moment's deliberation convinced him that one of the party had spoken to him as he brushed past.

He was able to decide that it was one of three who were in the midst of the swirling body.

So he resolved to keep his eyes and ears open.

Meanwhile Lonesome Jim had taken back the rifle and was handling it nervously.

"I daresn't," he said to Hammerston, while the other urged him to fire again.

"It's gone!" exclaimed Lonesome Jim, with great delight, pointing toward the prisoner.

Hammerston saw that the mud fly he had placed on Morrice's nose had dried and fallen down.

"Put one back there," he ordered to one of his followers, a beetle-browed man who had remained in the background in silence since he had helped in marching the prisoner upon the scene.

This wretch immediately obeyed the order of his chief, expectorating a good amount of tobacco spittle upon the clay he had roughly fashioned for his purpose.

Gordon Morrice writhed under this treatment, but was forced to submit with as good grace as possible.

"Sticks well—geewhillikum!" ejaculated Lonesome Jim, slapping his sides and dancing about in evident glee.

"Say, mister, does it bite?"

The outlaws laughed loudly at this, which seemed to encourage Jim to continue:

"I spect I can hit thet fly sure's whistlin'. Hol' back yer head a leetle, so's I shan't hit yer big nose. Bu'st her 'f I should, sure's Moses."

Again the outlaws laughed, Hammerston joining in with his followers. He was evidently pleased to find that the foolish stranger had finally awakened to what was wanted of him.

"You see your situation, Morrice," he said to the prisoner. "That fool is more than likely to blow your face to smithereens. If you want to get out of it simply sign this paper without further delay."

Morrice simply shook his head.

"Thet's where ye air clever," called out Lonesome Jim. "Blow off yer face! As if I'd spile yer picter."

"Up and about your business," cried Hammerston. "Let the sport go on."

Again Lonesome Jim lifted the rifle, this time bringing it to his shoulder, to lower the weapon almost immediately.

Then he raised it again, and this time pulled the trigger.

But he held the weapon in such a manner that the bullet was sent so near the head of Hammerston that he leaped more than half a dozen feet into the air, crying:

"Death and furies! what do you mean, fool of idiots?"

Then the enraged chief was about to shout some order to his men when one of his confederates came hurrying forward, saying:

"There's a call at the telephone. By the way Jackson is whoopin' her up, I think he must be desperit."

Hammerston stopped to hear no more, but dashed hurriedly to the 'phone, while his followers became silent.

Placing the receiver to his ear, Hammerston called out, in a loud key:

"Hello! is that you, Jackson?"

"Yes. Is it you, chief?"

"Yes. What's up with you?"

"The Old Nick is to pay. That young rough rider, it seems, got away, after all!"

This brought forth a round of oaths from Hammerston that must have made the telephone rattle.

"Explain."

"There isn't much to explain. It seems the trap set here for him missed somehow in doing what was expected of it. Anyway, he was not killed, as his body cannot be found."

"Keep a sharp lookout for him."

"We are. But I haven't told you the worst. The infernal dog has been inside our fortifications, and he used this line."

"Inside our fortifications?" demanded Hammerston. "Where was the guard?"

"The daredevil overpowered him, took the key and entered the fort. As near as we can tell he used the telephone then."

"Out upon you for a set of idiots. I should like to see him undertake to play such a game on me here."

"It would be just like him to come where you are."

"It would be only once. Who did he talk with over the line?"

"You must know better than I. It certainly was not with me."

Suddenly an idea flashed into the head of Hammerston.

Speaking again with a pitch of voice uncalled for, he asked:

"Have you used the line within an hour?"

"Not within three hours."

"But you spoke to me a short time since."

"Impossible."

"Then it was that young rough rider."

"I have no doubt of it. He was here a short time since. But no trace of him can now be found."

Hammerston's rage was too great for him to speak for fully a minute. Then he thundered:

"Hunt him down—find him, or every man of you shall hang."

"We'll do the best we can," replied Jackson. "Look out he does not come your way."

"Trust me for that," muttered the chief, throwing down the receiver and turning back to address his men.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BREAK FOR FREEDOM.

Nathan Hammerston, the chief of the outlaws of Dead Man's Pass, had barely turned his head about to face his followers when the silence was broken by the hoof beats of a horse.

The animal seemed to be coming along the main passway over which the young rough rider had come a little while before.

Every eye was quickly turned in that direction, strange as the sight would be in that place, expecting to see a horseman come into view at the entrance of the cavern.

There was something so familiar in that step, sounding from the underground pathway to the ears of the young rough rider, that he was prepared to see appear upon the scene his own favorite steed, Black Bess.

But, if it were she, how could she have found her way thither?

He trembled for her fate, if it should prove that he was right.

"Take the New Yorker back to his tomb and see that the guard is doubled!" commanded Hammerston, excitedly.

The young rough rider was standing near Morrice at this moment, having purposely taken this position, believing that a crisis in affairs was at hand.

Just how far he could depend upon Lonesome Jim to help he was unable to know, but he had decided upon a bold break for freedom.

The guard who had brought Morrice to the chamber now advanced to carry out the order of their leader.

Resolving to risk all upon a daring venture, the young rough rider whipped out a knife from under his black robe and swiftly cut the bonds that held Gordon Morrice.

"Quick—follow me!" he whispered in the latter's ears.

Partly prepared for this assistance from the warning already given him, the prisoner lost no time in obeying.

"This way," said Ted, springing forward toward the main passage.

At that moment the dark form of Black Bess appeared in the opening.

The noble quadruped was about to retreat at sight of the strange forms flitting to and fro in the cavern.

The young rough rider whistled.

In an instant her ears were lifted, and while she gave a glad whinny, bonnie Black Bess looked around with an anxiety shown in her eyes that was not to be mistaken.

She failed to recognize her young master in that disguise of his.

Nor was it any wonder.

None of the outlawed band, though they had begun to understand that something was wrong, had penetrated the black robe which covered the young rough rider from crown to sole.

Their own device was now working against them.

"Here, good Bess!" called out Ted, continuing to advance all the time.

The mare now gave a wild neigh of delight, for she had discovered the voice of her master, if she was still unable to locate him.

Nathan Hammerston, by this time, was able to comprehend in part the situation.

He realized that the prisoner so valuable to him was slipping from between his fingers.

"Stop him!" he cried, springing forward to intercept the flight of Gordon Morrice.

He was stopped in a most unexpected manner.

Lonesome Jim, either through accident or by design, thrust his rifle forward, and tripped the outlaw so he fell his length on the rocky floor.

"Sufferin' snakes!" yelled the strange man, "who'd a thought it!"

The next moment he ran toward Gordon Morrice, saying:

"I'm for gettin' out o' this."

He had dreamed that the young rough rider was inside the dark robe ahead of him.

"It is I, Bess," said Ted, reaching out a hand.

It must not be supposed that it took as long for all this to happen as it has to tell it.

Though stunned for a moment by his fall, Hammerston was quickly on his feet when he cried out sharply:

"Shoot them down! Don't let him escape!" showing that he was still thinking of his New York prisoner.

Aroused from the amazement the sudden action had brought, his followers seized upon their firearms to carry out his order.

But the long, heavy gowns interfered with prompt action, and before they could bring their arms to bear upon the fugitives the latter had reached the passage.

"This way," said the young rough rider. "Back, Bess, into the pass."

The mare obeyed with a promptness quite surprising, and before the outburst of the firearms filled all the cavern with its fearful detonations, the three persons and the horse had escaped beyond the range of the weapons.

"Follow me!" said the young rough rider, catching hold of the stirrup strap hanging to the saddle of the mare.

It will be remembered that she was without a bridle.

"Up and after them," commanded Hammerston, rushing forward at the head of his men.

"Jones, telephone to Jackson to head them off. They cannot escape."

But Ted Strong had already thought of the line of telephone, and before the outlaw named Jones could reach the speaking tube he had cut the wire.

A second volley from the outlaws now rang upon the scene, some of the bullets whistling down the passage whither they were fleeing.

"Go ahead!" ordered the young rough rider, "and I will cover our retreat."

Gordon Morrice and Lonesome Jim kept on according to the direction of their companion, neither of whom could as yet fully believe him a friend, though he was battling manfully for their cause.

The faithful mare hesitated.

"On, Black Bess, on!" commanded her master, hastily throwing off his disguise, and flinging it over her back.

This act brought a whinny of delight from the animal.

And up and down the passage rang the wild yells of the enemies as they recognized their rival.

The journey along the passage was made quickly and without receiving any harm from the frenzied outlaws.

Gordon Morrice hesitated upon the edge of the bridge when Ted called out to him to pass over.

Lonesome Jim followed closely after the man from New York and then Black Bess went safely to the other side, with the young rough rider close upon her heels.

Upon gaining the side at the foot of the steps, finding his enemies were following rapidly after him, Ted Strong quickly looked to find the fastenings of the bridge girders.

As he had expected, the chains were secured to hooks drilled into the rock.

"Lend a hand here, boys!" he said to his companions. "Lift up for all you are worth, and we can clear the chains from the hooks."

With their united efforts this was accomplished, and the ends of the chains free, upon loosening their hold the whole structure went crashing into the abyss.

The outlaws, who were now in sight, uttered yells of madness, as they realized that their pursuit was cut off.

This was followed by a volley of shots which rattled against the rock walls with dull thuds, and more than one ball came uncomfortably near to the fugitives.

CHAPTER X.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

Ted and his companions were still within easy range of Hammerston and his gang, and they were about to retreat up the natural stairway, when they were startled by the sound of a body of men coming swiftly down upon them.

It did not take the young rough rider long to know that

this party was composed of the outlaws about the fort, led, no doubt, by Jackson.

In this case it would be the height of folly to try and ascend the stone steps in the face of the fire of this portion of the enemy.

To remain where they were would be equally as hopeless.

They were between two fires!

Hammerston evidently realized this, for he gave a more encouraging command to his followers, and desisted from wasting further powder upon the fugitives at that time.

"We must get back under cover of some of the shelves of rock," declared Ted. "I believe there is a chance for us to the left."

No time was lost in seeking this cover, and so promptly did they act that it was done before Jackson and his men came into sight.

This retreat was not found to be large enough to hold the entire party, including Black Bess.

Hence the young rough rider looked around for some other place of concealment.

"You two might find shelter under that ledge just below, on our right," said Ted. "Bess and I will stay here."

Gordon Morrice showed that he was energetic of action, though he hesitated a moment.

"I have no weapon," he said.

"Take one of my revolvers," said the young rough rider. "And this gun I took from the gang will be worth more to you than me, as I have my own."

Armed thus, Morrice led the way to the second hiding place, Lonesome Jim going after him.

"Down, Bess!" ordered Ted, in a low tone, and his intelligent quadruped quickly obeyed.

"That's a good girl," whispered the young rough rider, patting her glossy head. "We will do very well here."

The outlaws descending the steps showed that they had not discovered the trio in their pathway, as they hurdied to the scene below them, the rough voice of Jackson urging them on.

The young rough rider knew it was a critical moment, but he remained perfectly silent, hoping the gang would pass wthout seeing them.

Once they could get above the horde their escape did not seem to be difficult.

This hope proved vain.

Hammerston and his followers were aware of the trap into which their allies were likely to fall, and he shouted to them:

"Look out there; they are lying in ambush."

Jackson stopped his gang quickly.

"Where away?" he asked.

"Near the foot of the steps."

No reply was given to this, while the squad remained where it had suddenly checked its advance.

"Wish the chief had held his tongue," thought Ted. "But I must find some other way to outwit them."

A silence of more than five minutes followed, during which the young rough rider, from his cover, could see the party under Jackson still hesitating about coming further.

Across the canyon he now looked in vain for any signs of Hammerston and his confederates.

"I wonder if they have any place of exit?" thought Ted. "I don't like this inactivity one bit. Their silence bodes us evil. If they don't move for another five minutes I am going to."

Having come to this decision, the young rough rider prepared to carry out his purpose.

The end of this brief respite, as far as could be seen, brought no change.

It is true the outlaws under Jackson were moving slightly to and fro, but they did not offer to advance.

On the other hand, a deathlike silence had settled over the passage leading to the cavern chamber.

"I'm going to risk it," mused Ted. "Keep perfectly quiet, Bess," he whispered to his equine companion, patting her on the neck. "I shall be back soon."

With these parting words to his faithful steed, as if speaking to a human being, he cautiously crept down the stairs, carefully keeping close to the wall.

He knew he was not likely to be seen by those above, and his real risk lay from those who might be across the chasm.

Gordon Morrice and Lonesome Jim saw him moving

silently down the way and watched him with keen interest, though the first, at least, did not neglect his duty in keeping guard over the outlaws.

Ted was undisturbed in his advance, and fifteen minutes later he had reached the brink of the abyss.

The outlaws were still quiet and he felt certain were preparing some surprise for them.

There was a narrow ledge of rock running along the edge of the chasm, and the young rough rider followed this path for a few rods, hoping to find some way of escape without going back to the place he had left.

While pursuing this course without any definite plan in his mind, he fancied he heard a human cry coming up from the canyon.

Half drowned by the sullen roar of water, it was very indistinct, so much so that an ear less acute than his must have missed it altogether.

Thoughts of Bud Morgan were in his mind, and this sound instantly awakened his interest.

"It sounds like some one in distress," he thought.

Dropping upon his stomach, lying at full length upon the rock, he tried to penetrate the darkness beneath him.

If he could not do this, he now heard the appeal quite plainly.

There was no mistaking the tone.

It was Bud Morgan's voice!

He dared not reply, as there was a possibility that enemies were within sound of his voice.

He did the next best thing.

He picked up a small bit of rock and dropped it into the depths.

Then he waited for some indication that it had been heard by Bud.

Getting no response the first time, he repeated the signal, not only once but several times before he was certain he received any reply.

"I can't hang here much longer," he made out of the speech which succeeded.

Ted dropped another pebble, as a sign that he would act as soon as possible.

Then he began to exercise his wits to find some way to rescue his friend.

What he needed was a piece of rope long enough to reach down to him. There was such a line in the lasso coiled about the saddle of Black Bess.

To get that would take a lot of valuable time, but he knew it was his only alternative, unless he left Bud to his fate, than which nothing was further from his purpose.

Accordingly, the young rough rider crawled back over the course he had come, finding Black Bess quietly resting where he had left her.

It was the work of but a moment to uncoil the lasso, and with this under his arm he moved down the stairway of stones the second time.

As he passed his comrades he signaled softly to them to follow him.

This they did, and a little later the three stood together at the foot of the steps, and at one side, so as to be out of the range of the outlaws.

CHAPTER XI.

RESCUE OF BUD MORGAN.

It was still quiet in that underground world, the only sound breaking upon the ear being the steady roar of tumbling waters fighting their battles half a hundred feet below them.

There was not a sign to show that bitter enemies were close at hand, waiting to consolidate their forces and for a favorable opportunity to overpower these three.

"Bud is below here," said the young rough rider to his friends as they reached him.

These last, following their young leader in silence, the three soon came to the spot where Bud's voice had come faintly up from the depths.

Ted quickly fashioned a noose in one end of the lasso, and then lowered it down over the brink of the chasm.

"I thought I heard the outlaws in the distance," declared Gordon Morrice.

"Look sharp for them," replied the young rough rider. "I do not feel like leaving Bud here to his fate. He has stood by me in many a hard spot. Bud's a noble fellow."

By this time he fancied the lasso had dropped to the water, but there was no indication that it had found its object.

Ted then slowly moved along the abyss, holding the line so that it fell free from any entanglement on the bank.

"He may have moved," he said.

Still finding no response, Ted dropped upon the bank and forming his hands into the shape of a funnel, he shouted down to his friend:

"Are you there, Bud?"

"Yes," came up faintly. "I shan't be much longer."

"Here's a rope for you. Catch on, and we will pull you up."

Having located Bud now as lower down the stream than he had first thought, Ted shifted the line so it fell directly over the other.

He soon felt it tighten, and he knew Bud had caught upon it.

After a minute Bud gave two or three jerks on the rope, as if to tell him he was ready.

"Take hold here, men," said the young rough rider to his companions.

Then the three, with their united efforts, quickly raised the dripping figure of Bud to the surface of the rock.

Ted himself put his arms about the shoulders of his friend, as he came within reach, and gently laid him down upon the hard path.

"Are you hurt, Bud?"

"Bruised, and sore, and tired out," murmured the other.

"I do not find that there are any bones broken," said the young rough rider, who made a hasty examination of the body and limbs of his friend, while they exchanged this question and reply.

"I think you will come out all right, Bud."

"I had given up looking for help," declared Bud, feebly. "How goes it?" and he showed increased interest in their situation.

"We are still in the trap," replied Ted. "But we must get out of it before the jaws close any tighter."

"There is a commotion behind us -up the steps," said Morrice.

"I was noticing it. It won't do for us to remain here longer. I wish Black Bess was well out of this."

"What is your plan?" asked Morrice. "We look to you for counsel and leadership."

"It is difficult to know just what to do. Here is Bud here and Black Bess in that passage, both helpless at the present time.

"From appearances I believe Hammerston and his fol lowers, thinking we are nicely caught in a box, have left the main cavern, and by some passway which we have not seen, gone to join Jackson's forces."

"It is easy to see what a trap we are caught in, unless we find some way of exit speedily. With this chasm cut ting off further flight, and the outlaws pouring down the stone steps in full strength, it is only the matter of a short and decisive fight when we must be shot down like rabbits in a corner."

"There they are again," cried Gordon Morrice. "You are certainly correct in thinking they have left the cave and are planning to attack us from the rear. What can we do? It looks to me as if we are lost."

"Not while there is life," replied the young rough rider. "I do not believe they will be able to get here in side of five minutes."

"As well now as five minutes hence. Do you propose to return to our holes in the wall?"

"No. We could not hope to defend ourselves against such overwhelming numbers for a moment."

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Lonesome Jim, "who'd a thought it?"

"Our only way of salvation is to cross the chasm," said Ted.

"How?" asked Morrice, in blank amazement. "No man can jump it."

"He need not do it as long as we have a good, stout line long enough to span it."

The young rough rider now coiled the lasso about his arm in preparation for a throw, while his companions looked on in silence.

A projection of the rock on the further side had ar-

rested his attention, and now he tossed the line out over the abyss, its dark, snakelike length hovering and trembling in the air for a moment.

Then it dropped downward, and so adroitly had the young rough rider made his cast that it caught firm and fast upon the projecting corner of the ledge close upon the ground.

Pulling upon the line to draw it yet closer to its support, Ted next looked about for some place to fasten the end in hand.

Soon finding a spot to suit his purpose, he quickly made secure this part of the lasso, being careful to draw it as tightly as possible.

"Who asks for a better bridge than that?" he asked, triumphantly.

"You don't mean to say you expect to cross upon that?"

"I do. I think I have enough of skill in that direction to enable me to do it."

"I can never do it," declared Morrice, his countenance falling at the thought.

"Sufferin' snakes!—nor me," said Lonesome Jim. "I never could climb a ladder without tumblin' like a hoss fly."

Bud made no comment.

"The worst of it is to leave poor Bess," said Ted, looking wistfully up the stone stairway. "I cannot bear the thoughts of that."

"Hark! they are coming down the steps," cried Morrice in dismay.

"It is my only alternative," murmured Ted. "I will get them over and then return."

Considerable commotion now came from the entrance way to the underground retreat.

The young rough rider prepared to carry into effect his plan.

Stooping over the weak and dripping form of Bud Morgan, he lifted the other in the arms and then arose.

Then Ted balanced the body of his friend to a nicety upon his arms.

"My God!" gasped Gordon Morrice, as he saw with horror the young rough rider step boldly out upon the swaying line hanging over the dark chasm, still holding in his strong grasp the limp figure of his friend.

Paying no heed to this remonstrance, the brave youth continued his hazardous advance, while the slender bridge beneath his feet swung to and fro under the great strain brought to bear upon it.

It seemed impossible he could reach the opposite bank, and Morrice and Lonesome Jim were speechless while they watched him.

Carefully, step by step, the young rough rider picked his precarious way across the chasm, his friends expecting every step would be his last.

But he proved so sure-footed that he reached his goal in safety.

Morrice and Jim felt like shouting for joy, but the increasing outbursts of the outlaws, now near at hand, checked such enthusiasm.

Ted heard these cries as well, and realizing that he had only a few minutes in which to act, he quickly laid Bud in one of the niches in the rock and started back to rejoin his comrades.

His return passage was made quickly, when he said to Morrice:

"If you dare not undertake the passage of the rope, hold fast upon my back and I will carry you safely over."

Under any other conditions Morrice would have hesitated to accept such an offer.

As it was, the continued yells of the foes, showing their close proximity, gave him no opportunity to hesitate.

A moment later, borne upon the back of the brave young rough rider, he was carried swiftly over the narrow path, where a single misstep or the slightest variation of the foot would have sent him and his bearer to certain death.

He could not suppress a shudder at the thought of the fate impending, and he trembled like a leaf even after he knew solid rock was reached.

"Look to your safety in one of the passages, and see that Bud is taken out of the range of their bullets," ordered Ted, while he turned to repass the rope bridge to save Lonesome Jim.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HEROISM OF A HORSE.

At this moment the foremost of the approaching outlaws must have caught sight of the daring young rough rider.

It is true it was too dark there under the stars and the midnight sky to see plain enough just what was taking place, but enough was discerned for them to know that the fugitives were undertaking an escape.

"Down upon them!" cried the hoarse voice of Jackson, in the lead.

"Don't shoot the New Yorker, but kill that young rough rider on sight!" thundered Hammerston, following down the stone steps as fast as he could make his way.

Ted Strong was now back by the side of Lonesome Jim, who stood with chattering teeth, in view of the deadly peril threatening them.

"We are gone coons!" he chattered.

"Hold fast to my back, and on the peril of your life do not lessen your hold. No need to choke me like that. Put your hands a little lower, so as not to stop my breath. There, now keep still. Shut your eyes if you are afraid."

It is safe to say this was the most anxious moment in the life of Lonesome Jim.

Though he denied it afterward, there is no doubt he did close his eyes while he was being carried over that perilous route.

It was well that he did.

A single movement of his might have cost both him and his preserver their lives.

The foot of the young rough rider had barely touched the line before a volley of bullets from the maddened pursuers hurtled through the air.

They could see now the bold attempt at escape, and fumed to think they were likely to be baffled at the very moment of expected success.

Pell mell the wild horde plunged down the rocky path.

But their tumultuous advance did not disconcert Ted.

Regardless alike of the lead flying in the air and their cries of rage, he sped with light steps over the line until he had reached the opposite bank.

Here he allowed Jim to slip from his back and seek a place of safety.

The latter lost no time, it is safe to say, in doing this.

The young rough rider stepped back so as to shield in part his form, while he turned at bay.

A dozen bullets whistled through the space where he had stood a moment before, showing that the outlaws were improving in their aim as well as proving their deadly purpose.

"Poor Bess!" murmured Ted, as he prepared to return the fire of his enemies, "what will become of her?"

So far he had heard no demonstration to show that she had been disturbed.

But he knew she could not remain much longer in her concealment without being discovered.

Discovery meant death to her.

At first he was inclined to return to the other side of the canyon, that he might make an attempt to save her.

But the close proximity of his foes told him that such an act would be suicidal without bringing any possible good.

"If I could get a shot at that Hammerston I would not mind the loss of powder," he thought. "But the shrewd wretch is careful to keep in the background."

"Are you protected there from their shots?" called out Morrice, anxiously. "It is needless to take any chances. I think we can easily escape by one of these rear passes."

"You may go if you wish," said Ted. "In fact, I think you had better, only take Bud along with you. I shall stay here a little longer—until the fate of Black Bess is decided.

"Gordon Morrice is the last man to desert a friend." replied the other. "Least of all you, who have proven yourself to be such a true benefactor."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" exclaimed a well-known voice, while Bud Morgan started to a sitting posture, "give me a gun an' I'll show 'em some ginuine fun."

"Keep your fire until I give the word," said Ted.

"Here, Bud, take Old Faithful, and see you do not disgrace him," handing his friend one of his revolvers.

"Ha!" he added a moment later, "they seem to hold a council of war."

The outlaws had now come to a standstill near the foot of the steps.

From the rear Hammerston was giving a harangue, the gist of which was his deadly desire to kill Ted Strong and recapture Gordon Morrice.

Hammerston then reached the front of his followers.

Seeing the young rough rider on the opposite bank he cried out:

"Hold up your hands or you a dead man!"

"Better look to your own safety," retorted Ted. "My revolver covers you."

"Surrender and we will spare your life."

"I expect as much if I do not," replied Ted, boldly. "I generally manage to keep a canyon between you and me since I have come to Dead Man's Pass."

"Little good that will do you here. We will fill you with lead."

"One ball sometimes is as fatal as a barrelful."

"Out upon you for a dotard. But, say, is that New Yorker with you?"

"I am not sure that I know who you mean. I think the population of New York is somewhere between four and five millions, and——"

"Bah! you know who I mean. Say, hand Gordon Morrice over to me, and I swear that you shall go free upon your promise not to return here."

"When I make that promise I will keep it. Is that all you have to say?"

While taking part in this brief dialogue Ted was busy in his mind trying to devise some way to outwit his wily foe.

But there was no need of that.

The next word of the outlaw was drowned by the shrill neigh of a hoarse, evidently in pain.

The young rough rider instantly recognized it as coming from Black Bess.

In a moment a wild commotion had arisen in the background of this scene.

As a matter of fact one of the outlaws had discovered the form of the mare lying under the overhanging rock.

Thinking its owner might be concealed behind her, he had sprung to the spot and dealt the creature a cruel blow upon the body.

At least it would have been cruel had his aim been as good as his purpose was deadly.

As it was, Bess received an ugly cut upon the neck and, maddened by the wound, leaped to her feet, sending her assailant to the rock insensible.

Then, uttering the cry mentioned, she bounded furiously down the stony pathway regardless of the attempts to stop her.

Some of the desperadoes were dashed under her feet, while others barely escaped a similar fate by springing to one side, with cries of terror.

The flight of a wild horse is one of the maddest to be witnessed. Nothing that man can do empty-handed can stop it.

Black Bess, determined now to find her young master, leaped down those stone steps three at a bound.

The outlaws, to a man, turned sharply about to see what was coming, some crying out in alarm, and others vainly calling upon the oncoming beast to stop.

From his vantage ground Ted Strong had a clearer view of the startling tableau, and, anxious to save his noble beast, he ran back across the slender bridge, regardless of the enemies that stood or struggled in front of him.

"Stop it!" yelled Hammerston, ignoring his human enemy in the face of this new foe. "Stop!" he thundered, and leveled his revolver fairly upon the four-footed assailant.

With another wild neigh, Black Bess paused directly in his path, her big eyes flashing like coals of fire, while her nostrils emitted the hot breath of a furnace.

Before the outlaw chief could discharge his firearm the infuriated mare caught him by the collar of his stout coat, and holding his weight by her teeth, swung him out over the yawning chasm.

Hammerston uttered a yell of terror.

With a swift stride the young rough rider gained the side of his faithful steed, and the two held the terror-stricken mob at bay.

"Help!" sputtered the hapless Hammerston, while he writhed and twisted in the hold of his equine captor.

Not a man in all that motley crowd of desperadoes dared lift a hand, knowing the deadly peril of their chief.

At that moment Bud Morgan, Gordon Morrice and Lonesome Jim, seeing the critical situation, stepped forth from their place of concealment, advancing with arms pointed at the enemy.

Believing these were only the vanguard of a mighty host near at hand, some one of the outlaws cried out:

"We give up!"

"Throw up your hands, every man of you," commanded Ted.

The order was quickly obeyed.

The victory was won.

Only one thing was needed to make it complete.

That was the securing of the enemy.

To accomplish this it was necessary to have the companions of the young rough rider at hand to bind the prisoners.

As far as this was concerned they might as well have been half a mile away, for not one of them could hope to cross that rope bridge.

But the young rough rider was equal to the situation.

"Cover them, boys, and shoot down the first one who lifts a finger. I will quickly secure them."

While his companions performed the part assigned them, Ted made good his word.

But before he had finished his task he sought to relieve Black Bess of her burden.

"Bring him here to me, Bess."

The mare began to obey, but at the very moment he seemed safe he struggled so as to break from her hold, and stagger back. The next instant, with a wild cry on his lips, he lost his footing, to fall head foremost into the dark depths of the river canyon.

His fate awed his companions into abject silence, and while Ted regretted the fate of the chief, he soon had secured the last of his followers.

"One of the best nights' work I ever did," he commented, when he looked over the discomfited crowd.

"And to you, my noble Bess, belongs a large meed of the praise."

Black Bess whinnied softly, while she laid her head gently against his.

"I must look after that gash upon your neck," said her young master. "It is not very deep."

There is little more that need be said.

After dint of much hard work, the young rough rider, with the assistance of his companions and not less that of Black Bess, the chain bridge was restored to its natural position, when the three passed over in safety.

It proved that Hammerston had left only a guard of two at the fort, and these were easily overpowered. In the cavern also four persons were found on duty, and these surrendered without resistance. It was believed that a few of the outlaws, learning the fate that had overtaken their leaders, escaped by flight. But these did not number many, and on the whole the young rough rider had ample reason for feeling proud over his capture.

It was a nine days' wonder when the little party of four marched into the nearest town with their train of captives.

These Ted soon turned over to the proper authorities, when he obtained a handsome reward for ridding the country of such a gang of desperadoes.

But the best part of Ted's reward was the happiness of the reunited lovers, and before they separated he had to promise them he would not fail to visit them the first time he should go to New York. But before that day should come he was destined to meet with many more adventures, and solve mysteries as great as that of Dead Man's Pass.

THE END.

Next week's issue, 55, will contain "The Young Rough Riders Close Call; or, The Girl From Denver." This story will tell of a beautiful young girl, who was robbed of her inheritance and persecuted by her enemies, but who, through the aid of the young rough rider and his companions, is restored to her rights and happiness.

YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY

4—Ted Strong's Stratagem; or, Saving a Boy's Honor.
5—Ted Strong's Ride for Life; or, Caught in the Circle.
6—Ted Strong on the Trail; or, The Cattle Men of Salt Licks.
7—Ted Strong in Montana; or, Trouble at the Blackfoot Agency.
8—Ted Strong's Nerve; or, Wild West Sport at Black Mountain.
9—Ted Strong's Rival; or, The Cowboys of Sunset Ranch.
10—Ted Strong's Peril; or, Saved by a Girl.
11—Ted Strong's Gold Mine; or, The Duel at Rocky Ford.
12—Ted Strong's Lawsuit; or, Right Against Might.
13—Ted Strong's Railway Trip; or, An Unsolved Mystery.
14—Ted Strong's Mission; or, Taming a Tenderfoot.
15—Ted Strong's Might; or, The Cross Against the Sword.
16—Ted Strong's Puzzle; or, The Golden Mesa.
17—Ted Strong in the Chaparral; or, The Hunt at Las Animas.
18—Ted Strong's Forethought; or, King of the Mesa.
19—Ted Strong in the Land of Little Rain; or, Bud Morgan's Vengeance.
20—Ted Strong's Water Sign; or, In Shoshone Land.
21—Ted Strong's Steadiness; or, The Cattle Rustlers of Ceriso.
22—Ted Strong's Land Boom; or, The Rush for a Homestead.
23—Ted Strong's Indian Trap; or, Matching Craft with Craft.
24—Ted Strong's Signal; or, Racing with Death.
25—Ted Strong's Stamp Mill; or, The Woman in Black.
26—Ted Strong's Recruit; or, A Hidden Foe.
27—Ted Strong's Discovery; or, The Rival Miners.
28—Ted Strong's Chase; or, The Young Rough Riders on the Trail.
29—Ted Strong's Enemy; or, An Uninvited Guest.
30—Ted Strong's Triumph; or, The End of the Contest.
31—Ted Strong in Nebraska; or, The Trail to Fremont.
32—Ted Strong in Kansas City; or, The Last of the Herd.
33—The Rough Riders in Missouri; or, In the Hands of His Enemy.
34—The Young Rough Riders in St. Louis; or, The League of the Camorra.
35—The Young Rough Riders in Indiana; or, The Vengeance of the Camorra.
36—The Young Rough Riders in Chicago; or, Bud Morgan's Day Off.
37—The Young Rough Riders in Kansas; or, The Trail of the Outlaw.
38—The Young Rough Riders in the Rockies; or, Fighting in Mid Air.
39—The Young Rough Rider's Foray; or, The Mad Horse of Raven Hill.
40—The Young Rough Rider's Fight to the Death; or, The Mad Hermit of Bear's Hole.
41—The Young Rough Rider's Indian Trail; or, Okanaga, the Cheyenne.
42—The Young Rough Rider's Double; or, Unmasking a Sham.
43—The Young Rough Rider's Vendetta; or, The House of the Sorceress.
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46—The Young Rough Rider's Silver Mine; or, The Texas Giant.
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49—The Young Rough Rider's Handicap; or, Fighting the Mormon Kidnapers.
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51—The Young Rough Rider's Bitterest Foe; or, The Challenge of Capt. Nemo.
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